

Knowing Duxbury's Roots

Myles Standish Part II - Plymouth Colony

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Editor's note: The following is the second part of a new series exploring Duxbury's roots. Last week's story focused Myles Standish, one of the best known of Duxbury's first English settlers who did much to make the Plymouth Colony survive and thrive.

By February 1621, the colonists decided to organize a militia under Myles Standish, who they democratically elected as commander (and continued to elect to that role until he passed away). Standish drilled the men regularly on fighting skills using pikes and muskets.

In March, the colonists had met with Native Americans via Samoset, an English-speaking Abenaki, who arranged for the Pilgrims to meet with famous leader Massasoit, of the nearby Pokanoket tribe. Then on March 22, the first governor of Plymouth Colony, John Carver, signed a treaty with Massasoit declaring an alliance between the English settlers and the Pokanokets to defend each other. Carver died that year and the next governor of Plymouth William Bradford and Standish were threatened several times by the Massachusetts and Narragansett tribes.

In August 1621, Massasoit's leadership was being undermined by a young man named Corbitant, who turned the people of the village of Nemasket (which is now Middleborough) against Massasoit. When word of this got to Plymouth, Bradford sent two interpreters to find out what was happening in Nemasket. The men were Tisquantum, who was called Squanto by the English and trusted by the colonists for advice regularly, and Hobbamock, who was both an advisor to the colonists and a well-known warrior to Native Americans. Corbitant took Tisquantum captive and promised to kill him. Hobbamock escaped and told the colonists.

On August 14, 1621, Standish led a group of ten men to Nemasket with the purpose of killing Corbitant. Hobbamock, who had become a friend of Standish (and spent his final years at Standish's house in Duxbury), took them to the site. Standish planned to attack Corbitant at night because they thought he would be sleeping. He wasn't there but the man and woman who were sleeping in the shelter were shot by the Englishmen waiting outside with their muskets ready. Luckily, Tisquantum "Squanto" was alive. The couple was brought back to Plymouth for medical treatment and the raiding party all went home.

That event might seem unnecessary given that Corbitant was not where they thought he was and Tisquantum was not harmed, but it did buy some peace. Corbitant and nine other leaders came to the colony and signed a treaty of loyalty to King James.

Then in November 1621, a Narragansett messenger dropped off a bundle of arrows wrapped in snakeskin, which the colonists were quickly told was a threat and an insult from the powerful tribe that occupied what is now Rhode Island. Bradford sent them another message – a snakeskin filled with gunpowder.

Standish had the colonists circle the village in upright logs, much like what visitors to Plimoth Plantation today see surrounding the houses. After that, Standish wanted a palisade constructed for soldiers to shoot at invaders from on high, which took the 50 men in the colony about three months to build, but they finished in March.

In April 1622, in what is now Weymouth, English businessman Thomas Weston set up a colony they called Wessagusset. The colony was not well-managed and they angered the Native Americans nearby. The following March (1623), Massasoit learned that many Native Americans planned to attack both Wessagusset and Plymouth colonies. One man, Phineas Pratt, left the Wessagusset settlement and came to Plymouth, which he said was constantly under threat by the Massachusetts and that men were dying at their posts from starvation.

A public meeting was called and it was decided to send Standish and eight men (including Hobbamock) to kill the warriors planning to kill the colonists

When they got to Wessagusset, they found that some of the English settlers there had moved in with the Massachusetts. Standish ordered them to come back to the settlement.

Pecksuot, a Massachusetts leader and warrior, came to meet him a day after the Plymouth party arrived and Standish claimed they were at the settlement on a trading mission.

Pecksuot wanted the English to know he knew that was not the case.

"Let him begin when he dare, he shall not take us unawares," he is said to have told Hobbamock. He came back to Standish later in the day, and noted visibly that he was much taller than the English commander.

"You are a great captain, yet you are a little man," he said. "Though I be no sachem, yet I am of great strength and courage."

Standish made an arrangement to meet Pecksuot for dinner in one of Wessagusset's one-room houses and the Native American met him with well-known warrior Witwamat and one other warrior, a young boy and several women. Standish came with Hobbamock and three other Plymouth men. The Englishmen shut the door to the house on a signal from Standish and he killed Pecksuot with Pecksuot's own knife. The two other warriors were also killed. There is no mention of the boy or the women being killed.

Standish ordered two more Massachusetts warriors killed. Standish sought a meeting with Massachusetts leader Obtakiest and they soon encountered him with a group of warriors. A fight ensued and Obtakiest escaped.

Standish carried the head of warrior Wituwamat home to Plymouth Colony. The settlement of Wessagusset emptied out after this, making this warfare unnecessary as it was supposed to protect the settlement. The settlers left for Monhegan Island. It also made trade with Native Americans almost impossible and many fled villages near the colony.

"As for Captain Standish, we leave him to answer for himself," wrote Bradford in a letter on the subject, which was looked upon as brutal by many. "He is as helpful an instrument as any we have, and as careful of the general good."

Next week, part three looks at Myles Standish's arrival in Duxbury.

References: Courtesy of the Drew Archives Library; Cape Cod Seashores Guide; articles from Duxbury Clipper; Steve Rasmussen of Coven Oldenwilde on Merrymount and Thomas Morton; Thomas Morton, "The New English Canaan"; The Weymouth Historical Society; Nathaniel Philbrick "Mayflower: A Story of Community, Courage and War"; Justin Winsor, "History of the Town of Duxbury"; Jenks, Tudor, "Captain Myles Standish"; Leach Frances, "Notes on the Name Duxbury"; "The Duxbury Book" Duxbury Rural and Historical Society, Browne, Patrick and Forgit, Norman, "Duxbury, Past and Present, " the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society; Goodwin, John, "The Pilgrim Republic: An Historical Review of the Colony of New Plymouth."